DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 110 EA 023 484

AUTHOR Lyman, Linda
TITLE Factors and Issues Affecting Board of Education Decisions: A Case Study.
PUB DATE Oct 91
NOTE 35p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, October 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Board of Education Policy; Board of Education Role; *Boards of Education; *Conflict Resolution; *Decision Making; Elementary Secondary Education; Policy Formation; Politics of Education; *Problem Solving

ABSTRACT

Findings from a historical case study that analyzed a school board decision making process during a crisis situation are presented in this paper. Criminal allegations made against the superintendent of a midwestern school system in 1984 created a crisis for the board of education. The superintendent of schools was charged with third degree sexual assault on a 17-year-old female student. The board made a series of 11 decisions as the case unfolded. Methodology involved content analysis of 42 public documents and 10 oral testimony transcripts. Ten factors and issues are identified as factors in the decisionmaking process, and the constraints model of policymaking processes is used to understand the cognitive, affiliative, and egocentric constraints affecting the board's decisions. Three recommendations about board crisis decision making highlight the need for: (1) board member training in crisis decision making; (2) further exploration of the constraints model's applicability to such decision making; and (3) further study of personal relationships, access to information, and student welfare. Other suggestions are that boards seek more than one legal opinion and develop policies for situations of sexual harassment and continuing employment in cases of criminal charges. Four predictions about board decision making in crisis are also included. (16 references) (LMI)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED389110

# Factors and Issues Affecting Board of Education Decisions: A Case Study

Linda Lyman, Ph.D.
Bradley University

A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting
of the
Mid-Western Educational Research Association

October 17, 1991
Chicago, Illinois

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

L. Lyman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS 023 484

Factors and Issues Affecting Board of Education Decisions:
A Case Study

ABSTRACT

Criminal allegations against the superintendent in a midwestern school system created a crisis for the board of education in 1984. The board reponded to the charge and sexual assault conviction with a series of eleven decisions that became the basis for a historical case study dissertation. This paper focuses on what was learned in that research about board decision making in a crisis. The case study combined historical and qualitative research methodology in the inductive content analysis of 42 public record documents and ten oral testimony transcripts. The paper presented one of the theoretical frameworks used in the dissertation to explain interactions of the ten factors and issues identified as having influenced the decisions. The constraints model of policymaking processes, developed by Irving Janis, offers insights into the cognitive, affiliative, and egocentric constraints affecting the board's decisions. The paper concludes with four predictions about board decision making in a crisis and three recommendations: (1) that board members need training in crisis decision making; (2) that the applicability of the constraints model to board of education decision making needs further exploration; and (3) that personal relationships, access to information, and student welfare are factors affecting board decisions that need further study.

# Factors and Issues Affecting Board of Education Decisions: A Case Study

A board of education is a decision-making group that sometimes must make decisions during a crisis. For a superintendent to be accused of criminal activity creates a genuine crisis for a board of education. Options open to the board may or may not be clear, depending upon policy guidelines or lack of them. Routine decision making, based on information and recommendations supplied by the superintendent, is no longer possible. Rational decision-making procedures may or may not be followed.

## Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to present what was learned about board decision making through historical case study of just such a crisis. The paper will have three main objectives: (1) to present the factors and issues that influenced the board's decisions in the case; (2) to discuss one of the theoretical frameworks presented in the study to explain the interactions of the influencing factors and issues, the constraints model of policy-making processes (Janis, 1989); and (3) to present selected conclusions from the study, including predictions about board decision making in crisis situations.

## Context of the Problem

Persons who study board of education decision making tend to write either for superintendents or for board members.

Some scholars writing for the professionals have analyzed board decision making in the context of improving board-superintendent relationships and the question of "who governs," the board or the superintendent (Eliot, 1959; Kerr, 1964; Boyd, 1976; Lutz & Iannaconne, 1978, 1986; Hentges, 1986). Articles on board decision making addressed to board members usually have included a similar focus on improving the board-superintendent relationship, while recognizing that the board's decision making must also serve the community. A guidebook for effective school board service frequently given to new board members contains an entire chapter on board decision making. According to the guidebook, types of crises boards face include student protests and conflict, parent and citizen eruptions, court orders, teacher strike and job actions (National School Boards Association, 1982, pp. 95-96). The discussion of court orders does not include criminal charges against the superintendent.

In one midwestern community in 1984, criminal allegations against the superintendent created a crisis for the board of education. The superintendent of schools was charged with third degree sexual assault of a seventeen-year-old female student. The board of education made a series of decisions in response as the case unfolded. Because the board decided to delay any action until after a court decision, the superintendent remained in his position from June 1, when the charges were filed, through the summer months and during the two-day trial August 29-30. The judge

announced the "guilty as charged" verdict on August 31. The board accepted the superintendent's "early retirement" resignation on September 5 and suspended him from duties, with pay continuing until December 1, the date on which he became entitled to higher state retirement benefits. On October 22 a judge sentenced the superintendent to thirty days in the county jail, placed him on probation for eighteen months, fined him $500, and ordered him to perform 200 hours of community service.

The board's decisions in responding to this crisis both provoked criticism and received support from members of the community. The board had no policy for handling such a situation. The board's routine decision-making behavior, including reliance on the superintendent for information and recommendations, was both impossible and inappropriate. The researcher participated in the board's decisions, serving as board president, and was therefore acquainted with the difficulty and complexity of decision making in this highly sensitive ongoing crisis. McMillan and Schumacher, in discussing the "participant observer" as an ethnographic researcher role asserted that "some studies on highly sensitive problems probably could not be done by an outside investigator" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1984, p. 393). In this study, having participated in the board's decisions enhanced the researcher's awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to the context and all its variables. Because the researcher participated in the board's decisions, research design

features to minimize the effects of the researcher's biases were critical.

## Statement of the Problem

The problem of this historical case study dissertation was to identify the factors and issues that influenced the board's decisions in what was ultimately a dismissal of the superintendent. These factors and issues were identified through analysis of documents from 1984 and transcripts of oral testimonies obtained in 1990. The purpose for conducting this study was to increase understanding of board of education decision making through focus on a series of decisions made by a board in response to a sensitive crisis situation. Specifically the researcher was able to:

1. Identify through historical analysis the factors and issues affecting one board's decisions in response to a highly sensitive situation, criminal allegations against the superintendent.
2. Generate, from the factors and issues identified, conclusions that extend understanding of how boards make decisions, particularly decisions in response to highly sensitive crisis situations or problems.

## Design and Methodology

The product of this research is a historical analysis of a single case, a design particularly appropriate when the aim is to determine "the particular pattern of factors significant in a given case" (Merriam, 1988, p. 31). Case study research can result in indepth understanding of one

phenomenon or process, beginning with broadly phrased questions about the phenomenon or setting, such as what happened, why did it happen, how did it happen?

A historical case study can also be categorized, along with legal and policy research, as analytical research (McMillan & Schumacher, 1984, pp. 434-435). Research questions in this type of research "focus on events (who, what, when, where), how an event occurred (descriptive), and why the event happened (interpretive)" (McMillan & Schumacher 1984, pp. 435-436). These two types of research questions guided and were answered by this study. The analysis of documents and oral testimony transcripts was inductive, working from the sources to identify facts and then to present generalizations (McMillan & Schumacher, 1984, p. 525).

Sources

A total of forty-two primary and secondary source public documents and ten oral testimony transcripts were analyzed. The use of public documents and oral testimonies provided triangulation of data. The public documents included board minutes, newspaper articles, and editorials. These documents were part of a larger file that also contained letters, personal notes, and miscellaneous confidential legal documents. Documents selected for the study were public documents that either presented the events or the board's decisions, presented a response to the board's decisions, or in some way contributed to understanding the factors and

issues that affected the board's key decisions.

Oral testimonies were obtained from ten persons: the six former board members who made the decisions, including the researcher; the former assistant superintendent; the newspaper editor; the organizer of a citizens' group who lobbied the board for a sexual harassment policy; and an attorney, who was a candidate for election to the board at the time of the incident and was subsequently elected to the board. Interviewees were initially contacted about the project by letter. The interviews were scheduled during a follow-up phone call and held either in the homes or offices of the interviewees. A release of information form was prepared for each person to sign at the beginning of the interview. The interviews were audiotaped and the tapes were transcribed by a professional secretary. The researcher listened to the tapes to verify the transcriptions before beginning content analysis. Fictitious names were used for the board and community members, the community, and the newspaper throughout the dissertation. Board members and other interviewees were assured that their names would not be linked to their responses nor used in the research report. Maintaining such anonymity is appropriate even though the facts of the situation are a matter of public record. The events and the decisions of the board called forth strong emotions and created divisions on the board and within the community.

Because the researcher's participant role could have

compromised the validity of the study, an experienced oral historian conducted the interviews. An interview-guide format was used for the one-hour interviews. A list of nineteen possible questions was prepared by the researcher to guide the interviewer. The directions to the interviewer were to ask as many of the prepared questions as possible during the hour, but to use her judgment in terms of what topics to pursue in more detail. The interview-guide approach was selected because "formal questionnaires have not been found suitable for oral history research" (Lance, 1978, p. 120).

Analysis of Sources

Content analysis was preceded by internal and external criticism. Inductive content analysis of the public documents and oral testimony transcripts focused on the decisions of the board beginning on May 14, 1984, when the superintendent notified the board of the allegations against him, and ending with the board's final decision on October 8, 1984, when a sexual harassment policy was adopted. Initial inductive content analysis of the newspaper articles and board minutes resulted in preliminary identification of factors and issues that influenced the board's decisions. Other influencing factors and issues were suggested by the preliminary review of literature. These possible influences were the topics of the nineteen questions prepared to guide the interviewer. In the course of the interview, the interviewees suggested other influencing factors and issues.

Comprehensive content analysis of the primary and secondary source documents and transcripts was accomplished using an information retrieval card system (Indecks). Research questions were answered after the data had been coded and cross-referenced.

Inquiry Audit

The researcher arranged for an inquiry audit of the process and product of the study to provide additional assurance to readers that the research had been done with care and met acceptable standards of scholarship. The audit procedure, in view of the researcher's participation in the decisions being studied, seemed an appropriate safeguard against possible omissions or distortions of data due to researcher bias. The audit process, as described by Lincoln and Guba, had two purposes: to establish the dependability of the inquiry process and the confirmability of the inquiry product. To establish agreement about the procedure, the researcher supplied the auditor with written information about inquiry audit procedures as described by Lincoln and Guba. He was furnished with materials in the following five categories: (1) raw data including audiotapes, transcripts, and the file of documents; (2) data reduction and analysis products including the interviewer notebook and coded Indecks cards; (3) data reconstruction and synthesis products including a complete draft of the dissertation; (4) process notes including the researcher's project log; and (5) materials relating to the intentions and dispositions

investigate sexual harassment policies.

5. To issue to the news media during the July 9 meeting a statement reaffirming the board's intention to take no action until after the court's decision.
6. To refuse to accept the attorney's resignation at the July 9 meeting.
7. To accept the "early retirement" resignation of the superintendent at the September 5 special meeting, with an effective date of December 1, suspending him with pay until December 1.
8. To appoint the Assistant Superintendent at Acting Superintendent at the September 5 special meeting.
9. To expand the committee on sexual harassment policies at the September 10 meeting to include additional representatives.
10. To appoint a committee to research methods of selecting a superintendent at the September 10 meeting.
11. To appoint a Community Input Committee to assist the board in selecting the new superintendent.
12. To adopt a Sexual Harassment Policy as recommended by the committee at the October 8 meeting. The policy includes a provision requiring board action in the event of sexual harassment or sexual assault charges filed against any school employee. The policy requires suspension with pay, without prejudice, pending the outcome of judicial

including a copy of the proposal as it was accepted by the researcher's supervisory committee (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 319-320). The auditor found the conclusions of the study to be warranted, stating that "there was a clearly defined audit trail from the original data through the study results to the conclusions derived from the study." The study results were, in his opinion, confirmable, and were dependable when restricted to public records and school board member recall of events.

## Findings

### Descriptive Research Questions

Five descriptive research questions focused on establishing the chronology of decisions made by the board and the community reactions to those decisions. Eleven decisions recorded in the minutes or newspaper accounts were discussed, along with one other decision mentioned repeatedly by the interviewees. Decisions of the board of education in responding to the crisis were:

1. To invite a local pastor to join the board at its executive session at the May 14 meeting.
2. To adjourn a special May 30 meeting without taking any action.
3. To issue to the news media at the conclusion of the June 11 meeting a statement declaring that the board would not comment on the charges until after the court's decision had been made.
4. To form a board committee at the July 9 meeting to

proceedings.

Community reactions to the board's decisions included Letters to the Editor and Editorials in the newspaper, the formation of a citizens' committee to lobby the board for a sexual harassment policy, citizen attendance and comment at board meetings, and a lawsuit alleging violations of the public meetings law.

## Interpretive Research Questions

### Key Decisions

The first interpretive question was: What were the board's key decisions? The key decisions were identified by examining the responses given by interviewees to three interview questions. Although not always asked in the same words, the questions were: (1) What were the key or critical decisions? (2) What were the best and the worst decisions? (3) If the board could redo one decision, what one would you recommend? Responses pointed to two decisions as key or critical decisions. These two decisions were each mentioned between ten and fifteen times in interviewee responses, while other less critical decisions were only mentioned between three and five times. The first of the key decisions was the decision to delay action until after the court system had reached a verdict. The board formalized this position in the statement issued at the June 11 board meeting. The second key decision was the acceptance of the superintendent's "early retirement" resignation at the September 5 board meeting with an effective date of December 1.

## Factors and Issues Influencing Key Decisions

The second interpretive question was: What factors and issues influenced the board's key decisions? Interviewees' explanations for the two key decisions suggested ten influencing factors and issues. A summary of the evidence for each of these follows.

1. Belief in the superintendent's innocence. Three of the former board members believed at the time, and still believe, that the superintendent was innocent of any wrongdoing. They believed that the charges were fabricated by persons in the community, including the county attorney, who wanted to get rid of the superintendent, who had been superintendent for fifteen years. These board members did not find the witnesses who testified against the superintendent to be credible. The three other board members spoke of initial belief in the superintendent's innocence, that turned to disbelief as additional allegations surfaced. Interviews of the board members indicated that they are still split three and three on the issue of the superintendent's innocence.

2. Legal factors and issues. The board was influenced by several legal factors and issues. The board's position of inaction until the court had made a decision was based on a person being presumed innocent until proven guilty, according to their explanations then and now. Four board members were particularly concerned with maintaining the presumption of innocence. Three board members mentioned fear of a lawsuit

by the superintendent if they were to pre-judge his case in any way and he were to be found innocent. Two board members insisted that they were not influenced by the attorney, but another board member disagreed. The final legal factor affecting the board's decision was the judge's verdict. The verdict left no choice but to dismiss the superintendent, according to several board members. One board member said that even if the verdict had been innocent the superintendent's effectiveness was finished. The present board member, an attorney, believes that the board's actions should have been affected by this effectiveness issue.

3. Personal relationships. According to those interviewed, personal relationships of various kinds both did and did not influence the board's decisions. One personal relationship that affected the decisions, according to the board's critics, was the longstanding friendship between the board attorney and the superintendent. The three community persons interviewed agreed, and also thought the board members to be influenced by their personal relationships with the superintendent. According to the editor and the attorney who is presently on the board, there was speculation in the community that personal friendship between the superintendent and three of the board members affected the board's decisions. However, all three of these board members said that their personal relationships with the superintendent did not influence their decisions. The other three board members were split about whether the superintendent influenced the

board. Two of them said there was initial but not ultimate influence. The third said that the superintendent's job was to influence the board, and that he significantly influenced the board's decisions.

4. Access to information. The board's decision not to conduct a separate investigation left board members in the position of relying on individual research. Some board members chose to gather additional information on their own. Others thought they were legally bound to remain objective in the event of a hearing, and did not want additional information. The board declined the county attorney's offer to share the investigation file with the board. Four board members did not think the board was affected by lack of access to information. Two others disagreed. The present board member said that, from his perspective, the decision making of the former board had customarily been hampered by limited information.

5. Economic factors. Three board members said that costs were a factor in their decisions and one said costs did not have anything to do with the board's decisions. The former assistant superintendent thought that costs were a factor, as did the newspaper editor.

6. Community influence. The board members were split on whether their decisions had been influenced by the community power structure, the newspaper, or the Committee for a Responsible Educational System. One board member, the former assistant superintendent, and the editor did not think

the board had been influenced by the community power structure. One board member thought the board was an extension of the community power structure.

The editor of the newspaper did not think the newspaper had influenced the board. Two board members thought the newspaper had been an influence on the board's decisions. Another board member thought that the newspaper had exerted a long-term influence by moving the board toward openness in its decision-making processes. One board member thought the newspaper had been fair; another thought there had been a lot of poor publicity. Several of the board members spoke of trying to do the "right thing" in spite of community pressure.

Four board members said they were not influenced by the citizens' committee. Another board member thought that the committee had influenced the timing of the board's adoption of the sexual harassment policy. The committee organizer said she did not think her group had been influential, except in forcing the board to look at some issues. The present board member thought the committee had influenced the quality of the policy decisions.

7. School board culture. Those interviewed were asked whether unanimous decisions were typical of school boards in general or this board in particular. There were also asked whether the board would have decided things differently if there had been a sexual harassment policy in place at the time of the incident. Several persons discussed unanimous

decisions. The editor said that unanimous decisions were typical of the board. The assistant superintendent thought that unanimous decisions were proper for a board. One board member said he did not see anything wrong with unanimous decisions. The present board member said he thought the criticism had not been of the unanimous decisions, but lack of open discussion in the decision-making process.

Each board member offered an opinion about whether the decisions would have been different had there been a policy in place to guide the board. Four board members said the policy would have been followed. One board member was not sure, and the other said that would have depended upon legalities. The assistant superintendent said the board would have followed the policy. The other three community persons interviewed either did not know, or were not sure, whether the board would have followed the policy. Generally, there was agreement that a policy would have made the decisions easier, although some thought the board would still have made an exception to policy for the superintendent.

8. Political factors. Several persons interviewed were asked whether internal or external politics influenced the board's decisions. Answers ranged from "no" to "of course." Board members commented on the influence of individual board member and community pressure. Two board members thought that politics had influenced the board's decisions, but another said no. The present board member and the former board president agreed that politics and political

considerations are part of every decision made by a public body.

9. Social issues. Those interviewed were asked whether or not the social issues of the mid-eighties, specifically sexual harassment and child abuse issues, influenced the decisions of the board. Six persons, including three board members, commented on social issues. Generally persons thought that the influence of social issues could be seen in the fact that persons came forward with charges against the superintendent and that the case was filed by the county attorney. The formation of the Committee for a Responsible Educational System reflected the times and the attention that was being focused on preventing sexual abuse in the mid-eighties. The citizen's committee organizer thought that the board had not even been conscious of social issues.

10. Student welfare. The final factor identified as an influence on the board's decisions was concern for student welfare. Three board members said that every board decision was influenced by a concern for student welfare. One board member said the major influence on the board's decisions had been the superintendent's welfare rather than student welfare. The organizer of the community group was critical of the board, saying that student welfare had not been considered at all. The assistant superintendent suggested that the board might have handled things differently had school been in session when the charges were filed.

## Constraints Model of Policymaking Processes

The third interpretive research question was: How can the board's key decisions be explained? Two theoretical frameworks for exploring the interaction of the influencing factors and issues were presented: (1) a multivariate political model for analyzing "who governs" education at the local level (Burlingame, 1988); and (2) the constraints model of policymaking processes (Janis, 1989). This paper will focus on the constraints model.

Through studies of crucial decisions made by executives in business and public welfare organizations, Janis developed a comprehensive model for understanding policymaking processes. The preliminary model presents different decision pathways and "specifies the conditions under which a policymaker will resort to a quick-and-easy strategy that relies primarily on simple cognitive, affiliative, or egocentric decision rules" (Janis, 1989, p. 139) instead of vigilant decision-making procedures. According to Janis, "whenever policymakers consciously or preconsciously evaluate one or another of the cognitive, affiliative, or egocentric constraints as so potent and difficult to manage that dealing with it is more important than finding a high-quality solution to the problem, they will adopt a simplistic strategy" (Janis, 1989, p. 140). Taking into account research findings in the social and behavioral sciences, Janis identified three categories of constraints to vigilant problem solving: cognitive, affiliative, and egocentric

constraints (Janis, 1989, p. 149).

According to Janis's theory, cognitive constraints can refer either to limited resources of the organization to supply pertinent information or limited cognitive capabilities of the person or persons who must make the policy decision (Janis, 1989, p. 28). Affiliative constraints refer to policymaker's affiliation with others in the organization and the desire of policymakers to seek a solution "that will not adversely affect their relationships with any `important people' within the organization" (Janis, 1989, p. 45). Egocentric constraints arise from strong personal or emotional needs (Janis, 1989, p. 66). These three types of constraints can impede vigilant problem solving behaviors of an individual or a group, particularly in a stressful situation.

The constraints model does not assume that organizational policy decisions are made by a unitary actor or a unified set of actors. Rather, understanding decisions "requires an analysis of the policymaking approach used by each of the powerholders in the organization who engages in whatever political and intellectual interactions contribute to the making of a policy decision" (Janis, 1989, p. 180). The constraints model when applied to group decisions can be used "to analyze sources of error that arose in any particular meeting when the members discussed a policy or in a series of meetings during which the members evolved a new policy decision or reaffirmed an old one" (Janis, 1989, p.

183). When any one or a combination of the limiting constraints becomes the dominant or crucial force affecting the decision making, then the policymakers may begin to show symptoms of defective policymaking. Instead of vigilant problem solving behaviors, the policymakers will tend to rely on simplistic decision rules. The simplistic rules differ according to which constraint is operating.

The assumption is that vigilant decision making features a pattern that is somehow disrupted by these constraints. Janis comments about vigilant decision makers:

> They tend to go about the tasks of decisionmaking in a careful manner, carrying out to the best of their ability the essential steps of problem solving. They search painstakingly for relevant information, assimilate information in a relatively unbiased manner, appraise alternatives carefully before making a choice, and do everything else required to meet the criteria for high-quality decisionmaking (Janis, 1989, p. 78).

In the decisions analyzed in this case study, the board members were operating under stress, without prior written policy, making policy decisions in what was an ongoing crisis. The following analysis considers the board's decisions in light of the three categories of constraints identified by Janis.

Cognitive constraints. There are basically two types of cognitive constraints, according to the theory: limited resources of the organization to supply pertinent

information, or limited cognitive capabilities of the persons who must make the policy decisions. Examples of rules followed when cognitive constraints dominate are: rapid fire decisions, satisficing, analogizing, bolstering, incremental change, and nutshell briefings (Janis, 1989, pp. 27-44).

In this situation, the board's access to information was limited. Normally a board of education has access to information relevant to its decisions through the superintendent. The superintendent also makes recommendations for action. However, routine decision-making patterns and procedures were disrupted, including access to information. The board chose to rely on the board attorney for information and legal advice. The decisions to delay action, not to conduct a separate investigation, and not to look at the results of the county attorney's investigation, left the board as a group without any formal access to information about the allegations against the superintendent. Although a majority of the board members did not feel their decisions were affected by a lack of access to information, others interviewed disagreed. The present board member suggested that either the board members did not understand the distinction he drew, in letters to those on the board at that time and in a Letter to the Editor, between the issue of effectiveness and the presumption of innocence issue, or that they chose to ignore it.

Persons affected by cognitive constraints can tend to make "rapid fire" decisions according to Janis. A "rapid

fire" decision is one made quickly, sometimes impulsively (Janis, 1989, pp. 34-35). The board's decision to bring in the pastor during the May 14 meeting could be considered a "rapid fire" decision since it was made on the spot after the board members first heard from the superintendent about the allegations that were pending against him. Several board members when interviewed said that had been a poor decision.

Affiliative constraints. Affiliative constraints refer to the affiliations of the policymakers with others in the organization, and the typical desire of policymakers to seek problem solutions that will not damage their relationships with other important persons in the organization. When affiliative constraints dominate, rules are: avoid punishment, follow the party line, exercise one-upmanship, rig meetings to suppress the opposition, and preserve group harmony (Janis, 1989, pp. 45-63).

The personal affiliations at work in this situation were numerous. The majority of the board members had a long history of working with the superintendent. Three former board members identify him as a personal friend. The majority of the former board members held the superintendent in high esteem professionally as well as personally. In addition, the board relied for legal advice on an attorney who was a personal friend of the superintendent.

One simplistic rule that can dominate when affiliative constraints operate is the "avoid punishment" rule. Janis defines "avoid punishment" as the "C.Y.A. (`cover your ass')

rule," with a central theme being "to make sure you will not be blamed if your advice or decision turns out badly" (Janis, 1989, p. 46). Particularly the board members who were personal friends of the superintendent wanted to "avoid punishment," or the superintendent's disfavor if he were found innocent. They were forced to deal with the consequences of the charges against the superintendent after he was convicted.

Egocentric constraints. Egocentric constraints arise from strong personal or emotional needs, such as the need to act from an emotion like fear, anger, or affection. Janis described two types of egocentric decision rules: "self-serving rules, directed toward satisfying strong personal motives, and emotive rules, directed toward satisfying strong emotional needs" (Janis, 1989, p. 66). A self-serving rule is: what's in it for me? Examples of emotive rules are: "Wham!" Get-rid-of-distress, rely-on-gut-feelings, retaliate, "can do" or the audacity rule, unconflicted adherence, unconflicted change, defensive avoidance, hypervigilance, and "Wow! Grab it!" (Janis, 1989, pp. 67-84). Egocentric needs also arise in high-conflict stressful situations, particularly when all alternatives are undesirable choices. "Emotional stress is aroused whenever policymakers realize that whichever course of action they choose could turn out badly, that they are likely to be held responsible and could suffer a loss of self-esteem" (Janis, 1989, p. 77).

In this situation, the choice to take action against the superintendent by suspending him with pay, for example, was an undesirable alternative, but the choice to leave him in office created instant and continuing criticism in the community. Given a situation creating a high level of emotional stress, a person will tend to display one of four coping patterns, all of which result in reliance on simple decision rules instead of steps of vigilant problem solving (Janis, 1989, pp. 78-79). Unable to take an action that seemed to be turning against a friend, and motivated by anger at the persons who had allowed these allegations to surface and charges to be filed, the board chose to take no action. This behavior, taking no action, is an example of a coping pattern called "defensive avoidance." Janis describes several rules that may be followed when a person or group practices "defensive avoidance." These are: Procrastinate if you can; otherwise pass the buck; or, if necessary, select the least objectionable alternative and bolster it by focusing on supporting arguments and ignoring opposing arguments" (Janis, 1989, p. 80). Failing to use available information tends to accompany defensive avoidance (Janis, 1989, p. 83). In allowing the superintendent to take "early retirement" the board selected an alternative less objectionable than cancelling his contract.

Summary. This brief exploration of the constraints model of policymaking process suggests that cognitive, affiliative, and egocentric constraints may have affected the

board's key decisions. The decision to delay action was evaluated as faulty by several board members and others interviewed. The resignation acceptance decision was evaluated as faulty by some critics in the community at the time, including the person who filed the open meetings violation lawsuit. Given this interpretation the major factors and issues become the legal issues, access to information, belief in the innocence of the superintendent, and personal relationships. The researcher's conclusion would be that board members may have allowed cognitive, affiliative, and egocentric constraints to rule to some degree and may not have practiced "vigilant problem solving" behaviors in making the two key decisions.

## Conclusions

In one sense, the findings of the study are the most important conclusions, particularly the factors and issues identified as having influenced the board's decisions. In addition, general conclusions emerged from the researcher's analysis of the findings. Three conclusions suggest action and are directed toward members of boards of education.

1. A board of education should seek more than one legal opinion in a sensitive situation involving legal issues and personal friendships.
2. Board of education policies should include a sexual harassment policy to fully protect the rights of students and staff and to create a safe climate for learning and teaching.

3. A board of education should have a policy for how to handle continuing employment of employees charged with criminal violations.

Three conclusions may be of interest to associations and agencies that provide workshop training for new and continuing board of education members. Each could become a topic for further research. The first two are related to a board member's access to and processing of information. The third is related to the board-superintendent balance of power.

1. If accustomed to information being supplied primarily by the superintendent, a board of education will have difficulty obtaining information for decision making should that pattern be disrupted.
2. In a sensitive situation a board of education will tend to rely on judgments influenced by personal relationships.
3. School board culture reinforces the power of the superintendent and can place the board of education at a disadvantage in a conflict with the superintendent.

The framework of school board culture research provides a final perspective from which to draw conclusions based upon the findings. Lutz and Iannaccone observed that the politics of a particular issue are often invisible because traditionally school boards operate, as did this board, with

the appearance of consensus and without open debate (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1978). Decision-making activities of this board illustrated, as Kerr also suggested, how considerations producing board decisions are often not revealed in public meetings (Kerr, 1964). This was particularly true of the board's acceptance of the "early retirement" resignation at the September 5 meeting. In addition, Kerr's conclusion that power resided in the "affective relationships which emerged among the members" was illustrated by the degree to which this board's decisions were influenced by personal relationships and friendships.

Lutz described board members as tending to meet in private to work out the "right" solution, stating that the vast majority "respect -- even revere -- the superintendent as the professional expert, looking to the superintendent, almost exclusively, for recommendations and information" (Lutz, 1980, p. 459). Lutz also emphasized the trustee orientation of the typical school board member, and the "elite" council decision-making behavior of the typical school board. This board exhibited characteristics of "elite" council behavior typical of boards in its avoidance of open conflict and in the prevalence of a trustee orientation. The trustee orientation was revealed in several board member's comments about doing the "right" thing and not being swayed by public pressure. In particular, the board members appeared, because of the absence of any discussion, to have come to the September 5 meeting at which the

resignation was accepted with a decision already made.

Lutz also stated that when a board moves in the direction of "arena" council behavior, the cause is often community conflict that can result in the defeat of incumbent board members. In this situation, the cost-saving argument presented as the reason behind the acceptance of the "early retirement' resignation may not have been accepted by the voters, who did not reelect the two board members who had voted for the settlement. The board moved in the direction of more open or "arena" council decision-making behavior after the lawsuit alleging an open meetings law violation and after the election of the two new board members.

Cooper suggested, and this case illustrated, that a board's dependency on the superintendent for information puts the board at a disadvantage in conflicts with the superintendent (Cooper, 1973). Initially it was difficult for this board to have access to information unfiltered by the preferences and perceptions of the superintendent. Ultimately, the board struggled with access to information because of the superintendent's previous control of information. The personal and position power of the superintendent remained a strong influence on board decisions, including the two key decisions.

Without a policy, processing the legal issues surrounding criminal allegations against a staff member was difficult for the board members, as Barnett had concluded it might be (Barnett, 1983). Comments of these board members

suggested that they may not have had a clear understanding of the legal issues, particularly the fact that school boards are not bound by criminal court decisions. Barnett had recommended survey research to ascertain the knowledge base of educators, including school board members, relative to that fact. This study also suggests the need for such research, as well as the need for board members to receive continuing education regarding legal issues generally.

Based on this case study of board decisions in a sensitive crisis situation, four predictions about another board's decision making in a sensitive crisis situation are offered: (1) That a board's decisions will be influenced by the interactions of a variety of factors, including political, economic, and legal considerations; (2) that access to appropriate information will be an issue; (3) that the board member-superintendent relationship will have significant influence on the board's decisions; and (4) that board members will base decisions largely on personal values, including friendship, and beliefs about what is "right."

Recommendations

The following are the researcher's recommendation:

1. Boards of education need opportunities for training in crisis decision making. Topics could include both the problem of and effective strategies for decision making in a crisis.

2. The applicability of the constraints model of policymaking processes to board of education decision making should be explored further. A quantitative or qualitative study might focus on comprehensive analysis of the decisions of each member of a board of education about a particular issue.
3. Further study of how factors and issues identified through this research affect the decision making of boards of education could contribute to the literature on decision making. Of particular interest would be the influence of the three factors about which there was the most disagreement in this study: personal relationships, access to information, and welfare of students.

In conclusion, to comment on the third recommendation, these were the factors and issues that generated the most debate and that raise larger issues. For example, consider these questions: Do superintendents operate in a world in which power lies largely in personal relationships and if so what are the implications? What information should board of education members have access to and through what channels should that information come? And finally, to what extent are board of education members influenced by a genuine concern for student welfare, and to what extent is concern for student welfare sometimes only rhetorical?

Selected References

Barnett, H. T. (1983). Credential revocation, dismissal, non-renewal and suspension based on criminal activities of public school teachers and administrators: The constitutional, statutory, and case law (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Georgia, 1983). Dissertation Abstracts International, 44, 1255A.

Becoming a better board member. (1982). Washington, DC: National School Boards Association.

Boyd, W. L. (1976). The public, the professionals, and educational policy making: Who governs? Teachers College Record. 77, 539-577.

Burlingame, M. (1988). The politics of education and educational policy: The local level. In N. J. Boyan (Ed.). Handbook of research in educational administration. 439-451. New York: Longman.

Cooper, B. S. (1973). A staff for school boards. Administrator's Notebook, 21(3).

Eliot, T.E. (1959). Toward an understanding of public school politics. The American Political Science Review. 52(4), 1032-1051.

Hentges, J. T. (1986). The politics of superintendent-school board linkages: A study of power, participation, and control. ERS Spectrum. 4(3), 23-32.

Janis, I. L. (1989). Crucial decisions. New York: The Free Press.

Kerr, N. D. (1964). The school board as an agency of legitimation. Sociology of Education, 38(1), 34-59.

Lance, D. (1978). Oral history project design. In D. K. Dunaway and W. K. Baum (Ed.). Oral history: An interdisciplinary anthology. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History.

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. London: Sage Publications.

Lutz, F. W. (1980). Local school board decision-making: A political-anthropological analysis. Education and Urban Society, 12(4). 452-465.

Lutz, F. W. & Iannaccone, L. (1978). Public participation in local school districts. Lexington: Lexington Books.

Lutz, F. W. & Iannaccone, L. (1986, February). The dissatisfaction theory of American democracy: A guide for politics in local school districts. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of School Administrators. San Francisco. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 274 041)

McMillan, J. H. & Schumacher, S. (1984). Research in education. Boston: Little, Brown.

Merriam, S.B. (1988). Case study research in education: A qualitative approach. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.